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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT AU PRINCE 000293

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CAR

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL HA

SUBJECT: HAITI: LATEST TRENDS IN STUDENT UNREST

¶1. (SBU) This message is sensitive but unclassified-please protect accordingly.

Summary

¶2. (U) High school and university students in 2009 have occupied university buildings and mounted protests that have turned violent and attracted political attention. Students occupied the campus of Haiti's national Teacher's College to protest the moving of science departments to another university, and have clashed with police. The Prime Minister met with them, but they called off their protest only after the university administration agreed to their main demands. Students at the Faculty of Ethnology have occupied the dean's office to demand better working conditions. Students of the Faculty of Human Sciences set ablaze a UN vehicle endangering two UN staff members. High school students in in the Artibonite Department, specifically in Gonaives, marched to protest wage arrears of their teachers, and clashed with police and with private school students who refused to support them. The Prime Minister met with several cabinet ministers to find a way to address teachers' back wages. While not yet threatening overall political stability, student protests demonstrate the continuing financial weakness and institutional vulnerability of Haitian education. End Summary.

Students Angered with Dean's Decision

¶3. (U) Approximately 100 students from Haiti's central Teacher's College (Ecole Normale Superieure/ENS) blocked roads surrounding the school grounds beginning February 17, and then occupied the dean's office in protest against Dean Jean-Vernet Henry's decision to move the math and science departments from the Teacher's College to the State University of Haiti (UEH) Faculty of Science. The students claim that the change ''would destroy the ENS'' and discourage student enrollment in their college. Students claim that the UEH is not able to teach subjects in a way suitable to teacher training. In at least two instances, the riot control unit (CIMO) of the Haitian National Police used tear gas to disburse the protestors who were throwing rocks and glass bottles at cars, buses and passersby. The police arrested one student on March 5. UEH students allegedly assaulted a professor on March 5 at a local radio station after discussing the crisis at the university on the air. The trustee board condemned the acts as intolerable and said they should be punished.

University Response: Course Access for All

¶4. (U) Vice Dean of UEH Fritz Deshommes stated that the change is an effort to reinforce UEH's capacity and give students the opportunity to earn a full UEH degree, rather than the certificate the Teacher's College awards, and give students full access to the UEH's courses and laboratories.

Faculty members from both institutions would be required to agree on all decisions regarding modifications to the mathematics, physics and biology curricula. The National Union of Haitian Students (l'Union Nationale des Normaliens Haitiens/UNNOH) also offered their support.

Ultimatums and Negotiations

15. (U) The students remained adamant that the UEH must continue to house the three disciplines. Media reports indicated virtually no public sympathy for the students or their cause. Prime Minister Michelle Pierre-Louis met with the students March 8, to no apparent effect. After almost three weeks, on March 13, the students and the University administration came to an agreement to keep the math and science programs at the Teacher's College (ENS). The students of the Teacher's College vacated the school on the same day.

The Ripple Effect

16. (U) Another protest, at the perennially unstable and somewhat radicalized Faculty of Ethnology of UEH, began March 6 when students occupied the Office of the Dean on March 9 over a number of administrative issues including the holding of University administrative elections. Professors at the faculty support the firing of the Dean. Students also demand better working conditions for their professors.

17. (U) There have also been apparently unrelated student

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attacks on MINUSTAH vehicles. UEH students vandalized a UN vehicle on February 6 when it tried to enter universit grounds, and then chanted slogans demanding MINUSTAH's departure from Haiti. On March 11, students from the UE faculty of human sciences set ablaze a MINUSTAH vehicle after forcing two female U staff to disembark. Students also stole equipment from the vehicle. The MINUSTAH personnel were not injured. The Minister of Justice in a March 2 communique stated that the perpetrators, several of whom were known to authorities, had taken advantage of the strife at the Teacher's College and the UEH. Police were instructed to find and arrest them. Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis released a statement March 12 apologizing on behalf of the government and ordering a full investigation.

High School Students Protest for Teachers in Provinces

18. (SBU) A number of students in Gonaives (Artibonite Department) and Jeremie (Grand Anse Department) were injured by police while protesting in support of their teachers who were on strike demanding payment of wage arrears. Ministry of Education officials stated that the former Minister of Education had hired teachers without the knowledge of the current government, which therefore had failed to include their wages in the 2008-2009 national budget. Striking teachers in the Artibonite Department and the Ministry of Education reached an agreement on February 11. In a separate meeting on February 26, President Preval, Prime Minister Pierre-Louis and the heads of Parliament's finance committees discussed the need for approximately USD 15 million to pay public school teachers.

Comment

19. (SBU) Student protests in Haiti are often sparked by grievances against university administrations, but sometimes become violent and occasionally mushroom into threats to security and political stability. Student protests helped bring down former President Aristide. Ethnology Faculty student demonstrations against the rising cost of living

helped inflame public sentiment against the government of former Prime Minister Alexis prior to the April 2008 food riots. Aware of those precedents, the Prime Minister and her government have intervened to try to resolve the underlying issues. The university and secondary school protests are further evidence of the financial and institutional weakness of Haitian education.

SANDERSON